

*Prince John Loewenstein*

## GOSSIP ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL

All the wisdom and discourse of the world  
turns in the end upon this point,  
to teach us not to fear to die. (Montaigne, *Essays*. Bk. I. Ch. 19.)

Here is the (abbreviated) text of a religious leaflet, which you may find in your letter-box or pick up in the street:

*Suppose it's true after all—what then?*

Two friends were talking on religious topics. They discussed the question of eternal punishment and agreed that there was no Hell and that a God of love could never allow His creatures to go to everlasting punishment. The conversation was over when a Christian who had been a silent listener said: ...“Suppose it is true, after all”. The words fell on the ears of the other two with unusual force. Suppose it is true that Hell is a reality. God said: “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Suppose it is true, after all. If it were not true, then the believer is not losing anything by living a good life with eternity's values in view, but if it is true, how terrible would be your doom if you “Die in your sins” (John 8:21).

“If it is true, if there is an after-life, what is the point in keeping it a secret?” asks the British writer Roald Dahl. “If word came down that there was a Heaven and Hell, and they let TV cameras go up and come down again and prove that Heaven was lovely and Hell was *Hell*, you'd see an astonishing transformation. People would be giving their money away and stopping to give hitch-hikers lifts. If it was really brought home to people that 70 or 80 years of behaving was all you needed to achieve everlasting life, any idiot could see that was a good bargain” (*Observer*, London: 27 Oct. 1968).

“From the point of view of God, there cannot be any Hell,” argues Nicolas Berdyaev in his *Destiny of Man*. “To admit Hell would be to deny God.” And Somerset Maugham says in his *Summing Up*, “Every artist wishes to be believed in, but he is not angry with those who will not accept the communication he offers. God is not so reasonable. He craves so urgently to be believed in that you might think he needed your belief in order to reassure himself of his existence. He promises rewards to those who believe in him and threatens with horrible punishment those who do not. For my part I cannot believe in a God who is angry with me because I do not believe in him. Plutarch long ago, put the matter succinctly. ‘I would much rather’, he writes, ‘have men say of me that there never was a Plutarch, nor is now, than to say that Plutarch is a man inconstant, fickle, easily moved to anger, revengeful for trifling provocations and vexed at small things.’”

A new generation of theologians has sprung up, a generation that shows no respect for the past, “The traditional views of Heaven and Hell are about 95% mythology,” declares the Jesuit scholar John MacKenzie of Notre Dame University. Other Christian theologians, protestant and catholic, express similar views. The very life after death has become shadowy, even doubtful, and the centre of gravity is being transferred to this world. Theology is becoming existentialistic!

Yet, let there be no misunderstanding: If some progressive theologians now shrug off the idea of Heaven and Hell as a myth, they are rather late in the day. Classical writers ridiculed such beliefs more than two thousand years ago. “Where can we find any old woman so silly as to believe the ancient stories of the horrors of the Nether World?” asks Cicero; elsewhere he says, “Ignorance of philosophy is responsible for the belief of Hell and its terrors.” Likewise Seneca, who argues, “Those tales which make the world below terrible to us are poetic fictions. There is no black darkness awaiting the dead, no prisonhouse, no lake of fire or river of forgetfulness, no judgment seat...”

Another philosopher who tried to *clear the mind from the fear of death* and the terrors of a future state is Lucretius—“the first Jean-Paul Sartre”, as we may well call him. Resolving the dread of death into the fear of eternal punishment *after* death, he denies the doctrine of a future life, and maintains that all the torments of hell are in this life and self-inflicted. Compare Sartre’s hell-play!

Tantalus, Lucretius says, symbolizes those who are oppressed by unfounded fear of fate, trembling before the misfortunes life may have in store for them. Tityos (lying in hell forever eaten up by birds of prey) is alive among us, devoured by gnawing jealousy or rent by the fangs of some other passion. Sisyphus too is present here for all to see, eaten up by unsatisfied ambition, toiling incessantly "to get to the top" and frustrated in his efforts. The Danaides (condemned to the endless task of filling with water a vessel which had no bottom) are those with a thankless heart, while Cerberus and the horrors of Tartarus stand for the fears of punishment, which torture the wicked. All this sounds sensible indeed, unless we hold with Baudelaire that "it is the devil's supreme ruse to make us believe that he does actually not exist." Yet, do we really need to fall back on Greek mythology? Does not Strindberg's biography or Somerset Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage* mirror the sufferings of our earthly life?

Immortality has been called the Christian hope; yet, surely, it is also the "Christian terror"—for no one can dare to presume upon the mercy of God!

One of the most controversial tenets in Christian Eschatology is the so-called Second Advent, when Christ is to come again "to judge the living and the dead and the world by fire". As, according to the teachings of their church, this "Last Judgment" will not alter the sentence pronounced at the end of each person's life, Roman Catholics have always failed to see what the show is all about. It is clear that the "Last Judgment" is not a Supreme Court of Appeal, nor is it actually a court at all, for it cannot reverse a sentence. We are, therefore, faced with no more than a mock-trial, a spectacular display of heavenly power, a kind of Super May-day parade, in which the blessed and the damned have to take part. For this purpose they obtain "leave of absence" from heaven and hell. The highlight and true purpose of the show is undoubtedly the resurrection of the dead. Now, we are told that the display will take place in the Valley of Josaphat. One wonders, of course, how this small valley could possibly hold all the people who ever lived on this earth.

Let us mention here the much sounder interpretation of the Seventh-day Adventists. They say, the ancient supposition that people go to heaven or hell immediately upon death is an infiltration of pagan mythology into Christian theology. The dead are merely asleep until

the return of Christ. Then and only then will final rewards and punishments be meted out.

It seems only fair to recall that the doctrine of eternal punishment has long been unpopular with theologians. It has in the past been opposed by some Christian thinkers on various grounds, such as the disproportion between the offence and the penalty, the moral and religious immaturity of men at death, and, last not least, the diminution of the happiness of the blessed in Heaven by their knowledge of the endless sufferings of others. This latter (rather selfish) argument against the existence of Hell has been advanced by the Prussian theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who, according to Schopenhauer, bored the Berlin Academy for years with his empty talks on Christian morals.

We know, on the other hand, that the sufferings of others have never prevented anyone from enjoying his own life. Sadly enough it seems that just the opposite is true. Long ago Lucretius wrote:

It is a pleasure to stand on the seashore when the tempestuous winds whip up the sea, and to behold the great toils another is enduring. Not that it pleases us to watch another being tormented, but that it is a joy to us to observe evils from which we ourselves are free. (*De Rerum Natura*, II, 1 seqq.)

And Thomas Aquinas makes the astonishing statement, "That the Saints may enjoy their beatitude and the grace of God more abundantly, they are permitted to see the punishment of the damned in Hell" (*Summa Theologiae*, pars III. Suppl. Qu. 93. art. 1) Ambrose Bierce's cynical definition of Happiness ("an agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another") has thus no particular claim to originality.

Contrast the noble teachings of the Mahayana Buddhists—their doctrine of the *Bodhisattvas*, the Saints who voluntarily refrain from attaining salvation (freedom from rebirth) in order to help others to find the Way! There is also the legend of the king who, though he deserved Heaven, stayed in Hell to comfort the sufferers, and vowed not to leave the inferno until all the damned are released. In the words of an ancient Tibetan Buddhist text:

"Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain, like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun.

Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before thyself has wiped it from

the sufferer's eye.

But let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain; nor ever brush it off until the pain that caused it is removed."

The same spiritual feeling is found in the Early Christian Church. Origen declared Christ will remain on the cross as long as a single creature remains in Hell.

"Taken in its ordinary meaning", Schopenhauer says, "the dogma [of eternal damnation] is revolting, for it comes to this: it condemns a man, who may, perhaps, scarcely be twenty years of age, to expiate his errors, or even his unbelief, in everlasting torment; nay more, it makes this almost universal damnation the natural effect of original sin, and therefore, the necessary consequence of the Fall...And as a last characteristic, we are told that this God, who prescribes forbearance and forgiveness of every fault, exercises none himself, but does the exact opposite; for a punishment which comes at the end of all things, when the world is over and done with, cannot have for its object either to improve or deter, and is therefore pure vengeance. So that, on this view, the whole race is actually destined to eternal torture and damnation, and created expressly for this end, the only exception being those few persons who are rescued by election of grace, from what motive one does not know."

The German philosopher also says:

To remove the enormous evil arising from Augustine's dogma, and modify its revolting nature, Pope Gregory I., in the sixth century, very prudently matured the doctrine of *Purgatory*, the essence of which already existed in Origen. The doctrine was regularly incorporated into the faith of the Church, so that the original view was much modified, and a certain substitute provided for the tenet of *metempsychosis*; for both the one and the other admit a process of purification. To the same end, the doctrine of 'The Restoration of all things' (*apocatastasis*) was established, according to which, in the last act of the Human Comedy, the sinners one and all will be reinstated *in integrum*...

Teachings of general pardon can be traced back to Iranian eschatology, from where they must have filtered into Christian thought. According to ancient Persian belief Man becomes subject to death in consequence of his sins; but when the period arrives that all the inhabitants of the world shall be converted to the religion of Zoroaster, then shall be the resurrection of the dead, with their earthly bodies and souls. The just shall be separated from the unjust, the former to be directed to Paradise, where they shall enjoy the highest pleasures, both of soul and body; the latter to be purified for an appointed time in burning metals, and cleansed from all their impurities; after which all created beings shall enjoy the most perfect happiness forever. Ahriman

(the devil) and his evil genii shall undergo the same purification; and after their limited punishment even they shall partake of the joys of eternity, repeat the Avesta, and join with all beings in the praises of God.

Now, it is true that some of the theologians of the ancient Church, in particular Origen, taught the doctrine of the ultimate restoration of all souls to the state of blessedness after many aeons of time. But these teachings have been condemned in both the Eastern and Western Churches:

If anyone says or holds that the punishment of the demons and of impious men is temporary, and that it will have an end at some time, that is to say, there will be a complete restoration of the demons or of impious men, let him be anathema.

(From the Book against Origen of the Emperor Justinian, Canon 9. A.D. 543).

In visualizing the horrors of hell theologians indulged themselves in a sado-masochistic orgy (well reflected in Christian art), which makes of the Iranian, Hindu and Buddhist hells (hot or cold) mere recreation centres.

Let us recall parenthetically that human justice introduced statutes of limitation for the persecution of criminal offences; on the Continent of Europe, for instance, a murderer is not liable to punishment after a lapse of twenty or thirty years, while British Criminal Law introduced the principle that *Life-imprisonment* is never for life, but only for a limited period, the length of which is determined by the conduct of the prisoner. The same idea is found in Eastern Religious systems. Iranian, Hindu and Buddhist Hells are, in fact, purgatories, seeing that the stay in them is only temporary.

According to Christian "divine" law, however, a human being, stained by "original sin" or living outside the Church, is never pardoned, but damned forever. Was it not decreed by the Council of Lyons II, in 1274 and confirmed by Pope John XXII in a letter to the Armenians, dated November 21, 1321: "that the souls ... of those who die in mortal sin, or with only original sin, descend immediately into Hell; however, to be punished with different penalties and in different places" (whatever that may mean)?

And do we not have the Papal Edict of Florence, dated February 4, 1441, which says:

The Council firmly believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, and heretics and schismatics cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart "into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41), unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock.

Does not "The Flock" represent only a tiny fraction of mankind, and is it not true that the founder of the Church and the apostles were all Jews? Is one supposed to believe that the six million Jews butchered by the German Nazis, are now in Hell, seeing that they had not been added to the flock, while the war criminal *Kaltenbrunner*, executed at Nuerenberg, is in Heaven? According to the doctrine *Kaltenbrunner* qualifies for that state, seeing that he was a Roman Catholic who "repented" and died fortified with the rites of the Church.

If Catholic hells are filled with Jews, Heretics, Schismatics and with members of other Christian sects, Lutheran hells, likewise, have special departments for Catholics. We actually find that every Christian sect has its hells for members of other Christian sects (and there must be many, judging from the fact that there are over 4,500 independent Christian Churches in African countries alone, some of them with an estimated membership of several hundred thousand!)

In Moslem hells, on the other hand, no difference is being made between Catholics, Mormons and others, all Christians being impartially treated as infidels. Hell, curiously enough, was conceived as a pyramid or cone in seven storeys; it was given one storey less than Paradise, as Moslems believed the elect would be greater in number than the damned (the Christians held the opposite view).

Here are a few grotesque details to illustrate the perversion of human fantasy. According to the *Koran*, the infidels "shall broil upon a burning fire and shall be given to drink from a boiling spring. Whenever their skins are well done then other skins will be given them that they may taste torment". The *Mishkat al-Masabih* (XX 15) specifies that "The fire of hell shall be seventy times as hot as the fire of the world. God will make the bodies of the infidels large, so that they may suffer more. They will be given food infinitely loathsome, of which they will eat and still be hungry. They will be bitten by serpents as large as two hundred camels, and by scorpions as large as mules, and the bites shall give pain for forty years".

Terrifying as these punishments are for an Arab, they would certainly fail to impress an Eskimo who has never seen a serpent, a camel or a scorpion! The idea of fire, on the other hand, would, no doubt, suggest comfort to him rather than awe. It was for that reason that early Christian missionaries in the Scandinavian countries represented to their converts hell as a place of intense cold. The hell of the ancient Iranians is described as dark and full of sad voices, stench, foul food, and cold. This conception probably sprang from the privations of winter on the steppes during the migration southward when the preciousness of the hearth made fire the very symbol of all that was best of man. It thus appears that "hell" is conditioned by climate and geography; people who suffer from cold have their gloomy ice hells, while others who are scorched by the sun will be tortured by fire.

Schopenhauer wondered, "For whence did Dante get the material for his hell, if not from this actual world of ours? ... and indeed he made a downright hell of it. On the other hand, when he came to the task of describing heaven and its delights he had an insuperable difficulty before him, just because our world affords absolutely no materials for anything of the kind". Dante's "Paradise" is thus utterly boring.

That the concept of Hell was derived from this material world is already apparent in Jewish mythology. The Hebrew *Sheol* (like the Greek *Hades*) stood for the underground abode of *all* the dead, who were supposed to "live" there, mere shadows of their earthly selves. *Sheol* (wrongly translated "Hell" in the authorized Version of the Bible) was thus no more than a dismal house of retirement. It was not regarded, at least in the early period, as a place of punishment or torment; this concept only appears in the Judaism of the Greek period. The *Gehenna* (or hell) of later Judaism is the purgatory of faithless Jews, who will eventually reach Paradise, but it is the place of *eternal* torment for the Gentiles. We thus have a Jewish hell for the non-Jews, exactly as we have a Christian hell for the Jews. A point of special interest is that *Gehenna* was not situated somewhere in outer space or in the bowels of the earth, but in this world and right under the eyes of everyone to see, namely in the Valley of Hinnom outside the southern wall of Jerusalem.

The word *Gehenna* is derived from *gehinnom*, a figurative use of the place-name which occurs also in the fuller form *ge ben Hinnom* "the



Valley of the son of Hinnom", where, according to numerous passages in the Old Testament, children were burnt alive in sacrifice to Baal or Molech. Child-sacrifice is also known to have been an element of the early Jahweh religion—a practice condemned by Isaiah and Jeremiah: "For the men of Judah have done evil under my eyes ... they have erected shrines in the Valley belonging to ben-Hinnom for burning alive their sons and daughters" (Jer. 7:30, 31). Or, "... they have drenched this Valley with innocent blood burning alive their children as a sacrifice to Baal" (Jer. 19:5). It was also here that the bodies of criminals were cast out (Is. 66:24). In later times the Valley of Hinnom was notorious as the place where fires burned continually to consume refuse. Thus arose the Jewish-Christian concept of a hell of fire, where beings are tortured for their misdeeds. By New Testament times Hell had been transferred underground and was combined with the idea of Sheol or Hades.

Hell is certainly the most dreadful product of human imagination. Worse still, hell would not really be hell without heaven, for we are told that the damned know about the pleasures of the blessed and envy them. Heaven has therefore also the function to enhance the sufferings of the damned. Yet, the whole idea of everlasting pleasure is, of course, utterly naive. Goethe once wrote, "Nothing is harder to endure than a series of happy days", and Schopenhauer says,

... as soon as want and suffering give man a relaxation, boredom is at once so near that he necessarily requires diversion and amusement. The striving after existence is what occupies all living things, and keeps them in motion. When existence is assured to them, they do not know what to do with it. Therefore, the second thing that sets them in motion is the effort to get rid of the burden of existence, to make it no longer felt, "to kill time", in other words, to escape from boredom. Accordingly, we see that almost all men, secure from want and cares, are now a burden to themselves, after having finally cast off all other burdens. They regard as a gain every hour that is got through, and hence every deduction from that very life, whose maintenance as long as possible has still then been the object of all their efforts".

Do we not think of many of our friends in reading these words?

Asked what he would do if he retired from business, the Greek shipowner and multi-millionaire Niarchos replied, "I think I would spend my time going hunting and fishing in various parts of the globe, but, actually I am sure, I would be bored to death. The Sheik of Kuwait came to see me and said he wished to purchase my fleet. I told him it

was O.K. with me. He then asked me what I would do with the money; I replied I would build a new fleet to enter into competition with him".

This may be an amusing pastime for Niarchos, but "killing time" in heaven doesn't make much sense. How would he like the idea of a life everlasting in which he keeps on building a fleet, which is promptly bought by some fiendish Sheik? Sisyphus in Paradise!

The ancient Egyptians had a simple and very effective remedy against boredom in Heaven. The blessed had to earn their living; they were compelled to cultivate the divine Ma'at wheat on which both they and Osiris subsisted. This necessitated laborious agricultural works, which were performed by a *corvee* or organized labour gang. The rich, quite naturally, did not like the idea and therefore took their personal servants with them to perform these menial tasks. Consequently (from Middle Kingdom times on) we find small figurines in the tombs, known as *Shawabti* or *Ushabti*. The original meaning of the word is unknown, but some associate it with "ushab" or "usheb", which means to answer. They think the figure was called Ushabti, because in the text cut upon it, the figure "answers" and says: "I am there". Ushabtis were made of wood, stone, fayence and sometimes of ivory or bronze; they were supposed to carry a digging tool and a basket in which to move earth from one place to another. In short the Ushabti is a model of a farm labourer. On the figure it was customary to cut a formula which was supposed to be said by the deceased in the Other World, to this effect: "In the event of my being condemned to spread top-dressing on the Celestial fields, or to fill the water-courses with water from the river, or to reap the harvest—such work shall be performed for me by Thee, and no obstacle shall be put in thy way." Below this formula were cut the words with which the figurine was supposed to answer: "I am there—whenever you may call me". When the deceased found himself in the Other World and condemned to work in the celestial *corvee*, he uttered his formula and the Ushabti would then change to a full grown man with digging tools and basket.

The number of Ushabti figures in tombs steadily grew, and in later times there are as many as 365, one for every day of the year, and Ushabtis of overseers are added for every ten Ushabtis of working type. In the "treasury" of Tutankhamon's tomb there were found ten black wooden kiosks; these contained the servants of the Pharaoh, that is to say 413 Ushabti figurines, together with 1864 model implements, such

as digging tools, baskets and water vessels. King Seti I of the XIXth Dynasty had caused 700 Ushabtis to be buried with him.

Egyptian theologians have been accused of transforming paradise into Hell by introducing forced labour, but there is nothing to indicate that this was intended as a punishment. On the contrary, it would seem that the idea was sound, as work alone could prevent the blessed from going mad. The notion of Hell was altogether alien to the ancient Egyptians, for they believed that annihilation not everlasting punishment was decreed for the wicked.

Let us mention by the way, that most intricate games were found in Egyptian and Sumerian tombs. These games were obviously placed in the graves to enable the 'blessed' to fight eternal boredom. See the illustration! (p.647 )

Swedenborg (who is usually well informed about these things) pretends to know that the Blessed have a 'future' in heaven (which would make their life meaningful).

'They who are in heaven are continually advancing to the spring-time of life, and the more thousands of years they live, the more delightful and happy is the spring to which they attain, and this to eternity, with an increase according to the progressions and degrees of their love, charity, and faith. Women who have died old and worn out with age ... come with the succession of years more and more into the flower of youth and early womanhood, and into beauty which exceeds all idea of beauty ever perceivable by our sight ... In a word, to grow old in heaven is to grow young.'

Swedenborg's vision of life in Paradise reminds us of a cheap trick film, one of those clever deceptions, which reverse the process of an action, so that the beginning comes at the end!

In Mohammed's Fool's Paradise sensual pleasures are magnified and multiplied *ad absurdum* and *ad nauseam*.

Now, it is a fact that here and there a sect of Islam has argued against Mohammed's "Materialistic interpretation" of Heaven, and Christians have wondered whether the sensuous descriptions of paradise in the Koran and in later Moslem literature had not a hidden spiritual meaning. Be this as it may, man does not live from "spiritual pleasures" alone, and pure spiritual pleasures do, in fact, not exist. Lin Yutang asks: "Is it possible to regard the enjoyment of music, which we call art, as decidedly a higher type of pleasure than the smoking of a pipe, which we call material? The classification between "material" and "spiritual" pleasures is therefore confusing, unintelligible and untrue".

One must be a Saint to visualize a Heaven with exclusively spiritual pleasures. Yet, as everyone knows, Saints never existed among the living. The average man has a rather selfish concept of Heaven: "A place where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs, and the good listen with attention while you expound your own", as Ambrose Bierce formulated it.

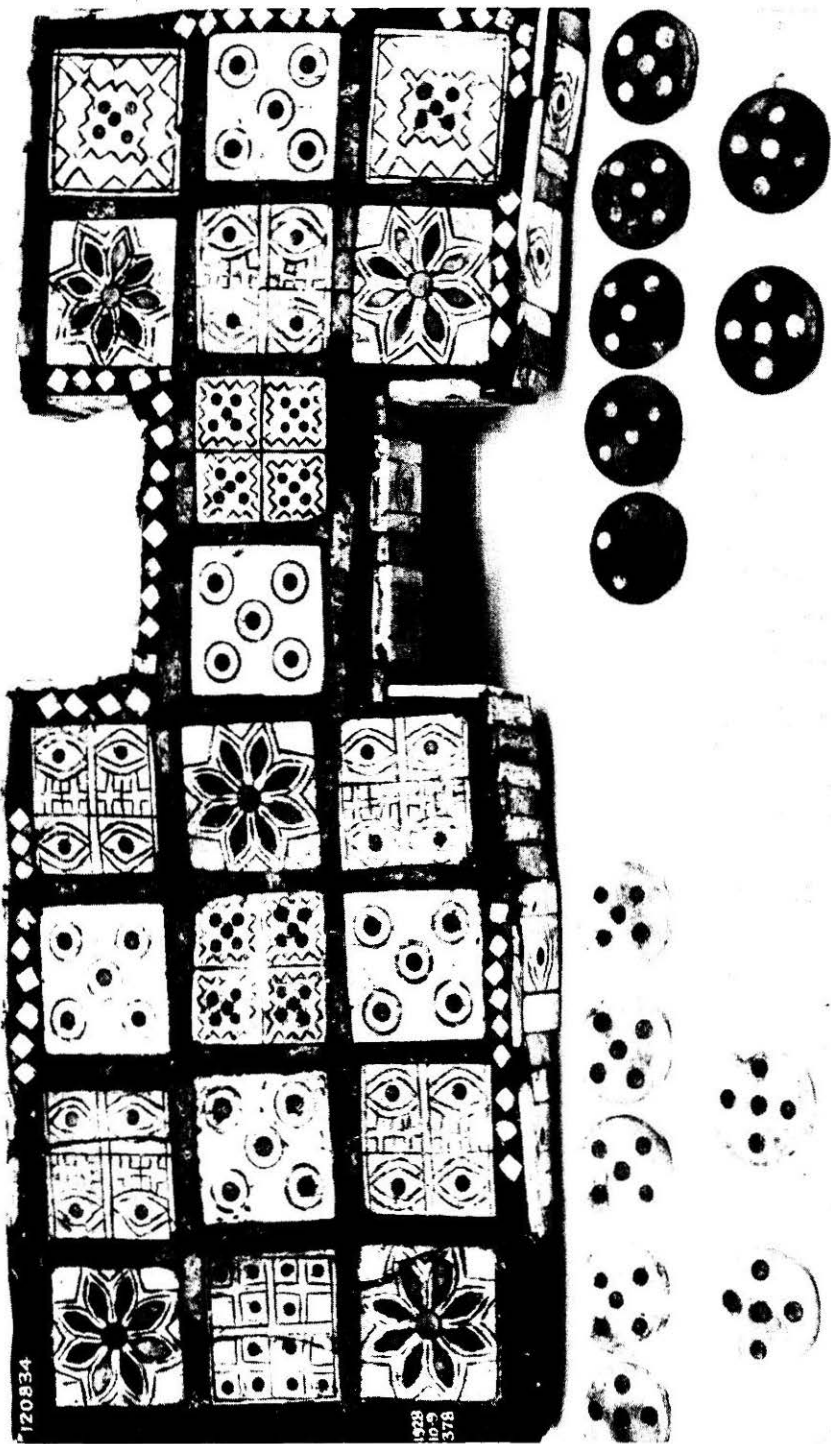
As mentioned previously, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians are now busy redefining Heaven and Hell not as the abodes of departed souls, but rather as states of mind and modes of being that start here on earth. They talk about the afterlife as a "spiritual dimension" to be understood as the fulfilment of this life. These "new" interpretations are, in fact, not new at all. Christian Scientists believe in heaven and hell but not in a geographical sense. In the words of Mrs. Eddy, "The sinner makes his own Hell by doing evil, and the Saint his own Heaven by doing right". For Episcopalians too Heaven is a *state*, while Quakers consider Heaven and Hell as matters for individual interpretation (an extremely wise view!). Jews no longer accept the notion of Heaven and Hell, and Unitarians also reject the idea, reasoning that a God of love and mercy would not condemn human beings to eternal pain because of wrong-doings during a brief spell of life; nor would God reward good deeds on earth with everlasting happiness.

Dostoevsky was horrified by the thought of a compulsory paradise for the 'Blessed', a state of euphoria automatically forced upon man. A similar consideration may have prompted a British Court to decide that permanent happiness is not an enviable state of mind but rather an illness. A few years ago the 51-year-old former executive John Ernest Pillivant was involved in an automobile accident in which he suffered brain damage; his injuries resulted in a personality change and left him in a state of 'euphoria'. The Court took such pity on his unnatural condition of permanent happiness that it awarded him \$55,382 in damages (a compensation, which, it seems to me, can only aggravate his unnatural condition) (*Enquirer*, June 16th, 68).

Many religious groups believe in some form of life beyond the grave, but their ideas are nebulous. Others admit openly that we have no means of finding out. Talented writers, who described life on other planets, have never been taken seriously, though it appears more and

more probable that our little Earth is not the only planet with organic life in the Universe. What then shall we think of those who describe 'Life after Death'?

When asked to explain Death, Confucius replied: "We have not yet learned to know Life; how can we know Death?"



Inlaid Gaming-board with its 'men', about 2,500 B.C., found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the Tomb of Queen Shubad at Ur, Mesopotamia.

Courtesy British Museum, London.